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EGYPTIAN CALM.

BY SIR MARTIN CONWAY.

THE popular impression of the style of the arts of Ancient Egypt is that it was a changeless style; that, from beginning to end, Egyptian art obeyed a single canon and conformed to changeless laws. We shall find that this was not the case. The style of Egyptian art had its stages of nascence, culmination, decline and renascence, like the arts of other countries, races and periods. Yet it is true that all the art productions of Ancient Egypt, from the First Dynasty to the coming of Christianity, possess a certain quality so obvious as to be instantly recognizable by any one who has ever seen a few Egyptian antiquities and been told what they were. The average child at a Board School, if shown a photograph of a Fourth Dynasty pyramid, or a Nineteenth Dynasty bas-relief, or a Twenty-sixth Dynasty statue, or the latest Ptolemaic temple at Philæ, would instantly recognize each of them as Egyptian. Only about the earliest works, made when the style was in process of formation, would any doubt arise, in the mind of an ordinary educated person, as to whether it was Egyptian or not. It would be easy to cite individual works of art, and fine works, too, which even a cultivated amateur would hesitate to ascribe to a particular country or school. No such doubt arises about things Egyptian. Of whatever period (except the very earliest), and of whatever kind (architecture, sculpture, painting, goldsmithy, manuscript), they are distinguishable from the works of other schools; all alike exhibit the Egyptian style. Obviously, then, our first work must be to distinguish the characteristics of this style, the qualities by possession of which it consists, the qualities it lacks which later styles possessed.

If, for example, we were to set up side by side for comparison

a sculptured figure from an Egyptian tomb and a terra-cotta statuette from Greece, any one could see at a glance that they belong to different categories of art. A world-epoch separates them. What is the fundamental quality absent from the Egyptian figure and present in the Greek? Is it not Grace? The Egyptian figure possesses merit, is good of its kind, monumental, simple, lucid, skilfully made—portraitlike, even, to a limited degree—but it is not graceful. The Greek terra-cotta possesses many defects, but in spite of them all it charms; and the quality by means of which it charms is its grace. Now, grace in a figure is a quality of motion and proportion. A graceful pose is one arrived at by graceful motion and, still suggesting the motion that led to it, suggests also sometimes motion to come. These suggestions of motion are most obviously perceptible in drapery, but they can likewise be plainly traced in the modelling of the surface of a body, even in the modelling of a face. In every work of Greek art, after the archaic period, evidence will be found of at least an effort on the part of the artist to express this ideal of grace. No such effort can be traced in Egyptian works. Egyptian artists rarely availed to represent motion, never graceful motion. As a rule, even their moving figures are as still as snap-shot photographs, the most motionless representations of moving figures produced in modern days. Look at the many pictures of wrestlers at Beni-Hasan, the ball-players in various tombs of the Middle Empire, the peasants driving cattle in tombs of the Ancient Empire,—it is the rarest thing for one of these images actually to suggest motion. Occasionally in a hunting scene there may be found a faint suggestion of the flight of a bird, or the movement of a beast, but never of that rushing torrent of motion relatively common with artists of the Pelasgian schools; and with them, though there is motion, there is never intentional grace of movement.

We know that the Egyptians were fond of looking on at exhibitions of dancing, but dancing among primitive peoples does not necessarily imply grace. I have seen dances performed by a number of different groups of semi-civilized natives in various parts of the world; but I can only remember one that was graceful, and I am sure that the grace was intended. As a rule, what the native onlookers applauded was vigor of dramatic action in the dancers. That probably was what the Egyptians expected. A

single bas-relief of the time of the New Empire, found at Gizeh, may perhaps be quoted as an exception; but, however graceful in actual fact may have been the movements of the dancing girls with their tambourines therein depicted, the grace escapes the sculptor. You have only to compare the Egyptian bas-relief with one of the well-known Greek Bacchantes to be assured of that.

If from sculpture we transfer our attention to architecture, a comparison of corresponding works enforces the same conclusion. Examine in succession pictures of one of the temples at Pæstum and the best part of the great temple of Amen-Ra at Karnak, the Hall of Columns. The Theban temple is far from being one of the finest Egyptian temples, though it is perhaps the most famous. It owes its fame to its monumental dignity, to the great boldness of the architect's—or perhaps the patron's—design; partly, also, to its mere antiquity. The fame of Pæstum is due to the beauty of the architecture and to nothing else. The main element of that beauty is perfection of proportions, likewise an element of grace. But architectural grace depends upon other qualities besides proportion, though it is not easy to set them down in words. Here, of course, motion has no part. A building might conceivably be designed in absolute perfection of geometrical proportions in all its parts, and yet might lack grace; for its last perfection seems to reside in those slight variations from absolute sameness of repetition, those individual touches, those small departures from machinelike accuracy, which imaginative architects have always permitted themselves to decree, thereby endowing with life and pleasant variety—with a kind of motion or play of form—what would otherwise have been a cold and rigid rendering in visible materials of a mathematical formula. The moving eye of the spectator ranging over a row of columns not absolutely one like another in every smallest detail, though all apparently alike, derives from them an impression not dissimilar to that derived from graceful motion, when the divergences from absolute identity of form and accuracy of equal spacing have been intentionally ordered by a creative mind.

In no ancient Egyptian building is found architectural grace of this kind. Sometimes good proportions are found, though at Karnak and Luxor even those are lacking. Egyptian architects of the New Empire, whose buildings alone survive, never sought

after grace, never felt the lack of it. They were striving to attain other perfections, to embody an ideal into which grace did not enter. Even in the days of the Ptolemies and Roman Emperors, though the influence of Greece was not unfelt in Egypt, Egyptian artists remained insensitive (and it is well that they so remained) to the new qualities which Greece had introduced into the artistic ideals of mankind. Ptolemaic temples are as purely Egyptian in all the qualities that make them architectural as the very pyramids themselves.

What is true of the sculptors and architects of Egypt is true of all her artists of every kind. Just as surely as Christianity brought Love into Religion, Greece brought Grace into Art. The arts of Egypt—and, for that matter, all the arts of all the pre-Hellenic schools, Chaldean, Assyrian, Minoan, Hittite—lack the quality that Greece gave to the world, and that has generally been regarded since as almost essential to a work of art. Yet absolutely essential Grace is not. Without it works of art, and great works, too, were made in Egypt; and their greatness depended upon other meritorious qualities never more grandly embodied in material form than by the ancient artists of the Valley of the Nile.

If we compare characteristic Assyrian and Egyptian works, we shall find ourselves enabled still further to define the boundaries of the Egyptian ideal. Take, for example, a battle scene from the bas-reliefs that once adorned the Palace of Sennacherib, and compare it with the representation of Rameses II fighting the Hittites; or set a hunting incident from the Palace of Sargon side by side with one from a tomb of the Ancient or Middle Egyptian Empire; or, perhaps best of all, compare the lion from the Palace gate of Assurnazirpal with the Egyptian lion now preserved near it in the British Museum—these, and many another similar comparison that might be made, prove at a glance that, while the technical skill of the artists of Egypt and Assyria is approximately on the same plane, and whilst both are approximately at the same stage of artistic development, the ideals of the two national schools are different. The ideal of the Assyrian artist may be described as an ideal of rage, of might, of physical power or force in action—qualities that are absent, and in the case of the Egyptian battle scenes lamentably absent, from the work of Egyptian artists. The Assyrian lion roars, and threatens

the oncomer with teeth displayed. If the posture of his body (with its five legs) is purely conventional, the spirit of the beast is plainly enough expressed, and we readily admit that he is about to leap on his prey and tear it limb from limb. The Egyptian lion is no such tremendous beast. There is no rage in his expression, no threat in his pose. He is dignified, even benignant, in aspect. He suggests not war, but peace. The Assyrian beast is for driving the enemy from the gate or rending him with sudden destruction. The Egyptian lion does not dream that an enemy exists within mighty Pharaoh's range. He is not at hand to protect his master, but to accompany him with dignity and express his resistless might.

By continuing this process of comparisons and contrasts, we might make yet more plain, what is perhaps already evident enough, that the great virtue, the distinguishing quality, of the Egyptian ideal is the quality of Monumental Calm. This ideal of calm resulted from the concurrence of a number of circumstances, racial, geographical and temporal, at which we must briefly glance.

Egypt, as Herodotus said, is the gift of the Nile. The Egypt of the Ancient Empire and the prehistoric times that preceded it was the banks of the Nile, the narrow strip annually covered by the inundation, lying between the First Cataract and the apex of the Delta. In prehistoric times the banks of the river consisted of swamps and patches of jungle. The fertile, irrigated fields that have replaced both are the result of long-continued human labor. Irrigation and the canals necessary for it seem to have been a prehistoric invention, increased in historic times, and still in process of development under British direction. Irrigation implies government. Wherever water has to be distributed over a large area of cultivable land, law and administration are necessary and the people become disciplined. Thus in the remote valley of Hunza, in the Karakoran Mountains of Central Asia, the whole area of land upon which the Hunzakuts dwell is rendered fertile by the distribution over it of water diverted by a single bold canal from a glacier torrent. The Thum of Hunza controlled this canal, which passed immediately below his castle, and he thereby held the people in the hollow of his hand. The result was that the men of Hunza formed a better organized, better disciplined, body than any of the neighboring tribes.

Hunza thus became a terror to its neighbors, notwithstanding the paucity of its possible population when every inch of cultivable ground was worked. It was the same with many of the tribes controlled by the Incas. They lived upon land that had to be artificially irrigated. The consequent organization of the folk led them to attain a higher civilization than was elsewhere reached in pre-Colombian South America.

Irrigation welded the mixed population of the Nile Valley into a state and gave them into the hands, first, of a series of local chiefs and, presently, of a King. Government in Egypt, except during recurring periods of political disease, was always strong. One dynasty of commanding monarchs succeeded another. Sometimes the Pharaoh was the local chieftain of one centre, sometimes of another, who raised himself to supreme power. Seldom for long together was the country divided between two or more rulers. Physical conditions forbade. The Nile made all Egypt one kingdom and gave despotic power to a single monarch. Thus the Egyptians were taught by nature to obey a ruler. They became the most submissive race of antiquity.

Nature also taught them the idea of law. Nowhere are the sequences of natural phenomena more orderly than in Egypt. The sky is seldom even flecked with clouds. Day by day the sun rises and sets in unveiled splendor. Night after night the countless glittering squadrons of the heavens march from horizon to horizon in unwavering procession. The seasons of the year begin and end with regularity. The rise and fall of the Nile, mysterious, wonderful, unfailingly recurs. Great must have been the effect of this visible orderliness of Nature upon a simple people. Naturally, invisible powers were conceived of by them as determining such regularity. The gods were very near them, irresistible divinities before whom they must needs bow down.

Again, the landscape of Egypt is essentially reposeful. It is so simple—the flat-topped edge of the desert plateau at a greater or less distance on either side of the Nile, cliff-fronted, delicate in tone; the broad stretch of almost flat land beneath; the silent, even-flowing river; the clear sky; the sparkling atmosphere; the broad, simple sweeps of color at sunrise and sunset. Beyond the habitable land—sheer desert; trackless; swallowed up in the blaze of daylight almost as completely as in the darkness of night; a burning, waterless, miserable land, irreclaimable, hopeless.

Finally, the climate of Egypt tended to impress the Egyptian with the same sentiment of calm. Building, as he naturally did, at the edge of the cultivable area, what he built, were it but fashioned of wood or sun-dried mud, lasted almost indefinitely. Nature conserves human handiwork in Egypt. Almost everywhere else Nature seems hastening to destroy it. Even the bodies of the dead, buried in the sand with little preparation, dried up rather than rotted away.

Thus the Egyptian expected regularity rather than change, expected the future to be like the past. His surroundings tended to make him obedient, contented, or at least resigned. Small wonder that, when Egypt produced artists, the ideal they devoted themselves to express was this national spirit of resignation and calm.

Fully as potent as these external forces and local circumstances upon the minds of the artists of Egypt was the Egyptian belief in a future life—itself, no doubt, the result of forces and circumstances still buried in the night of time. Amongst ancient peoples, the Egyptians had the reputation of being the most religious. We judge that they merited it. They were never a war-like folk. They were industrious and religious. Their faith included a multitude of factors still very obscure to us, but the largest factor, even at an early date, was obviously their belief in a future life. They held to that so strongly as to devote no inconsiderable part of the present life to making material preparations for the next. No proof of the genuineness of that part of their faith could be more convincing. Their art was powerfully influenced by this belief. It was to a large extent an art of the tomb, pervaded, therefore, by the serenity of death.

It is not to be supposed that we possess an accurate knowledge of what Egyptian religious ideas were. We can observe that they developed from age to age. Doubtless, they were never clearly defined. All such ideas are vague at any time and with any people. The following statement makes no claim to be complete or accurate. It only attempts to suggest in a general way the kind of notion which the average educated Egyptian held as to the constitution of his personality and the possibilities of his fate. In common with other folks at an early stage of intellectual development, the Egyptians believed that a human being consisted of at least two parts,—a body and a ghost, shadow or double. It

was observed that in dreams persons were beheld whose bodies were not materially present. When a man fainted or slept, something seemed to go out of him; when he came to, or waked, that something came back. This was the double, the ghost—the “Ka,” as they called it. The Ka was an impalpable thing, shaped like the body and behaving like it. Death was the separation of the Ka from the body. The Ka was conceived of as depending for its existence upon the body just as a shadow depends on the form that casts it. Annihilate the material form and you annihilate the shadow. Thus, if the Ka was to be kept in existence after death, the body, or at least the material shape of the body, must be kept in existence. This seems to have been the rudiment of the Egyptian idea of a future life. It was developed into a complex belief about which all sorts of legends were grouped. The Ka was to remain separated from the body for 10,000 years, during which time it was to pass a varied existence in the mysterious regions whither the sun voyaged in the night. After 10,000 years, Ka and body were to be reunited and a new earth-life was to begin. Thus the body, or its material shape, had to be preserved for 10,000 years. Hence came mummification, all the elaborations of the Egyptian tomb, and, most important, the invention of portrait sculpture—the purpose of the sculptured figure being to serve as a physical basis for the Ka in the event of the actual body being utterly destroyed.

It was not enough merely to keep the Ka in existence; it had likewise to be provided with comforts, occupations and possessions. If the double of a stone statue could be the double of a once living man, it was not difficult to conclude that the double of a stone loaf of bread might be equivalent to the double of a real loaf of bread. Now, a human Ka was believed to feed on the ghost of food, to be served by the ghosts of slaves and servants, to live in the ghost of a house, to own the ghost of an estate, to cultivate the ghost of ground, and generally to stand in need in the ghostly world of the ghosts of all the persons and things that a human being needs or enjoys in this world. The imagination only needed to be stretched a trifle further to satisfy itself that pictured images of all these things were as good foundations for their ghosts as sculptured images, at all events with the help of magic formulæ duly recited at propitious times by the descendants of the dead, or by priests, or even by pious persons.

Thus the tomb became the house of the dead man's Ka, and its walls were covered with images of whatever he would need: a house, fields and their cultivators, servants engaged in all manner of industries—in fact, an entire epitome of contemporary Egyptian life. The whole strange development was logical enough once a few simple assumptions were made. The scheme was not peculiar to Ancient Egypt. We find traces of it from China to the Bay of Biscay. It lies at the root of the veneration of saints, the preservation of relics and the dedication of a church to this or the other saint whose relic is supposed to be preserved within it. The point specially noteworthy about Ancient Egypt is the logical manner in which the idea was worked out. The Egyptians were a peculiarly logical people, and their art was a logical art. They never went further with art than logic took them. There is no sign in any work of theirs of a leap of imagination. No divine revelation ever carried them off their feet or raised them into an ideal realm of pictured beauty. They remained always solidly planted with both feet on the soil of the Egypt that they knew.

Let me give a single instance of their logical procedure. If the ghost world was to be like their own Egypt, a Ka would be liable to be called upon to do forced labor on irrigation canals, perhaps, or in the fields of a King. Fancy some high priest of Amen-Ra or Royal Friend or other great personage's double thus distressed! How should the danger be avoided? A plan was duly evolved, and one of utmost simplicity. With the mummy were buried a number, sometimes hundreds, of little mummy figures made in clay, porcelain, wood or stone, each provided with a hoe or mattock. On each was written an inscription to this effect: "When you hear the name of such an one [the dead man] called, say, 'I am here.'" These figures were, therefore, called "respondents." It is no exaggeration to say that they have been found by hundreds of thousands in the excavated tombs of ancient Egypt.

It will now be evident enough how it came to pass that the art of Egypt, as we know it, was so largely affected by the idea of a future life. It was the great agency by which a future life was to be secured for the dead. Most well-to-do people saw to their own future comfort for themselves while they were alive, and even made provision for the performance at their tombs forever of

anniversary ceremonies for the comfort and sustenance of their own ghosts. No man is likely to feel particularly sad about his own ghost, or to waste much sentiment upon it. If he thinks it is going to have a good time, he will probably regard it with complacency. Hence the art of the Egyptian tomb is not at all sad. On the contrary, it is particularly cheerful. The painted and sculptured subjects represent every-day occupations, and the words put into the laborers' mouths are the ordinary remarks of peasants, not lamentations or prayers. It follows that we need not look for the expression of deep emotion, or for elevation of sentiment, or even for resignation, but for the matter-of-fact attitude of mind of a man overseeing his household and ordering his dinner. There is no trace of any idea of sin or evil, of repentance, redemption, expiation, or any such ideas. Only in later days, when the priestly caste had obtained an unhealthy predominance in the country, do we find the walls of tombs (almost always royal tombs) encumbered with pictured allegories of the muddy theology of an overgrown and overfed body of priests. These things are not art and do not call for our attention. They need only be mentioned to be dismissed.

If, then, the emotions which death engenders in the living, the sense of loss, the pity, sorrow and resignation which survivors experience, are all absent from the Egyptian tomb, wherein, it may be asked, did the idea of a future life affect Egyptian art?

I reply that all the works of art buried in an Egyptian tomb were intended to last 10,000 years. That intention governed the artists and reacted upon the style of the Art of Egypt. It is a most important fact—perhaps the most important and fundamental fact that the student of Egyptian art has to remember. There was no place for passion in such an art; none for grace; none even for charm. Each figure had merely to be made lucid—plainly occupied about its business or visibly shaped in the form required, and that was all. The art of the Egyptian tomb was to serve a useful purpose, not to please. The arts of the temple and the palace might be required to please; not so the arts of the tomb. Had there been no temples, no palaces and no growth of art in them, the tombs, for all the figures and drawings they contained, would never have produced anything that should properly be called art at all. For art exists to please and has no other reason for existing. Things made merely for use are not

works of art. Egyptian art, therefore, did not arise in the tomb. It arose aboveground and had its life there; but it was applied, and so voluminously applied, to the tomb as to be greatly affected and severely injured by that application. It was injured by the fact that so large a part of the energies of Egyptian artists were employed upon the production of works intended to be buried as soon as made. It was affected not wholly unfavorably by the conservatism of form thus encouraged and by the simplicity, directness and veracity proper to figures and paintings intended to be the doubles of actual every-day life.

Buried figures made in limestone, wood or even clay might endure forever in Egypt, but those exposed to the gaze of men would not so endure unless their substance was of unusual strength or their size colossal. The Egyptian habit of mind, trained by contemplation of that long future of ten thousand years, demanded above all things endurance. It chanced, or was decreed by the same evolution that produced the Egyptians themselves, that they dwelt in a land which provided them with the hardest rock suitable for sculpture and with great masses of rock capable of being carved *in situ* into such images as their ideal demanded. Thus nature and man were in harmony. The obedient Egyptians, governed by a mighty Pharaoh, living their lives in a land where the irresistible forces of Nature visibly operated with recurrent regularity; believing, too, in a future life the duplicate of the present; not looking for change, nor turning their attention to lands beyond the isolated valley in which they lived cut off from the rest of the world—developed an ideal of majestic, calm, enduring power, and learned how to express it in great sculptured figures, wide-extended ponderous buildings, colossal pyramids and vast rock-cut interiors. They learned to fashion the hardest rocks into the simple forms their art demanded. They learned finally to give to small objects the dignity they had devised in the handling of great masses, and even to design on their flimsiest papyrus manuscripts decorations as majestic as those which covered the walls of their temples, and which still produce upon modern visitors an impression of monumental majesty and everlasting calm such as no other artists of the world have ever equalled, still less surpassed.

Later races have produced nobler and far more comprehensive works of art. Egyptian art responds to but a small group of

human emotions. It selects very little out of the infinite complexity of nature. It awakens only a small area of our sympathies. But what it attempted to do, it succeeded in doing with a success that is absolute. You may go beyond the ideal of Egypt in every direction, but within the limits of that ideal you cannot surpass it. The Egyptian Sphinx, for example, is a perfect type. Modern artists sometimes try to improve it—with what failure let the modern Sphinxes at the base of Cleopatra's Needle on the Thames Embankment bear witness. No one has ever succeeded in making a better figure in the Egyptian style than Egyptian artists made. The best colossal statues in the world still erect are those called of Memnon at Thebes, wrecked though they be; the best rock-hewn statues those of Rameses at Abu Simbel. To make such works, a people in the ancient Egyptian stage of development, animated by a simple majestic idea, were requisite. It was likewise requisite that they should not only live when, but in the very kind of country where, the Egyptians actually lived. Providence brought the race, the ideal and the necessary material surroundings together, and Egyptian art was the result. We may enjoy it, learn from it, preserve or destroy it, but we cannot imitate it.

Thus it is with all the ideals that have ever obtained complete artistic expression. They have attained it at some definite time and in some definite place at the hands of a people in a definite stage of development. The works in which it is enshrined are inimitable, for the circumstances of their production cannot recur. The art of Egypt, however, is remarkable, not only for the ideal it enshrines, but for the perfect clearness with which that ideal is expressed. Other ideals have reigned for a short period—a century, perhaps two or even three centuries; the Egyptian ideal was patiently elaborated and contentedly expressed during some 4,000 years, not without developments of detail, but without fundamental change. The reward of this patience and persistence was the utter clearness and approximate perfection which the artists attained in the expression of their ideal, not in one or two arts only, but in all the arts simultaneously. Other schools of art have been greater in one art than in another, have adapted their ideal to painting, or sculpture, or architecture, as the case may be. The Egyptians attained an equal success in all the arts as far as they carried them. Their painting, sculpture,

decoration, architecture and all the so-called minor arts are alike excellent in their several kinds and absolutely harmonize one with another. It is not possible to say that one is subordinated to another. Never was a single style more completely carried through the whole fabric of a national life than the Egyptian. Even Greece was inferior to Egypt in this respect. Egypt alone could afford the time for the complete development of her simple style, and the complete expression of her simple ideal, in her national life and art. For this reason, if for no other, the works of art which have been so miraculously preserved to us in the land of the Nile are worthy of patient study and pious preservation. Perfection is not attainable by man, even when raised to the rank of artist. The greatest artists are often greatly imperfect. Witness Leonardo da Vinci and Michel Angelo. Great schools of art in the days of their culminating power may only succeed in suggesting faintly, by comparison with what might have been, the glory that their ideal would have manifested if it could have attained complete expression. Of the ideal of Egypt we may say that it was adequately, indeed completely, expressed. All that it had to yield was drawn from it. Further in that direction man could not proceed. That is the title to glory of the ancient Egyptians, and for that they will be honored so long as the history of art remains a subject in which men take interest.

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